

Advocates for a 'New in '22' Towson High explore delisting its landmark status



Towson High advocate group "New in '22" met with county officials in March to discuss the process for taking the school off the historic landmark list, making it easier to renovate and expand the building. (Baltimore Sun Media Group file)



By **Libby Solomon**
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A member of a group that advocates for a new Towson High School building by 2022 met with county officials in March to explore the possibility of taking the historic stone building off the county's landmarks list.

The meeting was announced on the Facebook page for "New in '22," a group formed three years ago to push for a new 1,800-seat building rather than renovate the aging and overcrowded Towson school.

Towson resident Steve Prumo, a New in '22 founding member, wrote in the Facebook post that removing landmark status would allow the school system to make changes to the building, or remove it, without the approval of the county's Landmarks Preservation Commission. He wrote that building a new facility to fit the growing student body would be cheaper and easier.

"Delisting would give the project maximum flexibility both from an architectural standpoint and a financial standpoint," Prumo wrote in the post.

"I feel more of an allegiance to the kids that are going to go there, and I feel more of an allegiance to their future, than I do to the current structure," Prumo said Wednesday.

The meeting Prumo referenced on Facebook included county Historic Preservation Planner Teri Rising, as well as County Executive [Kevin Kamenetz](#)'s chief of staff Don Mohler, said county spokeswoman Ellen Kobler, who characterized the meeting as "purely informational."

The original 5-level stone structure of the school was built in 1949 and was designated in 2006 a landmark by the Baltimore County Landmarks Preservation Commission.

Kamenetz, who is running for governor, announced in September that he would include planning money for two new area high schools in his Fiscal Year 2019 budget, which he will present to the County Council in April.

The Baltimore County Board of Education announced in January that it is seeking \$15 million in the proposed fiscal year 2019 schools' budget to plan for two new Towson-area high schools.

Advocates for a new Towson High, as well as a new Dulaney High, have been some of the most vocal in asking Baltimore County Public Schools to replace aging facilities, Prumo said at the time.

New in '22, made up of parents and other community members, has been working to convince Baltimore County officials to earmark funding in fiscal year 2019 to begin planning and design of a new Towson High.

Never been done

Stripping a building of its landmark status has never been done in Baltimore County, Landmarks Preservation Commission member Carol Allen said.

"It's not a real possibility," Allen said. "What it means is that every building listed in Baltimore County is in jeopardy. It's just not going to happen."

To take it off the list, according to county law, the owner of the building — the school system — would have to request that LPC recommend it be removed. After a public hearing process, the County Council would then have to vote to remove it.

Phoebe Evans Letocha, who leads a group billed as an alternative to New in '22, said she has serious concerns about taking Towson High off the landmark list.

“Landmarks are designated landmarks for a reason,” Evans Letocha said. “If you start going back and delisting, it defeats the whole purpose of preservation.”

Evans Letocha has said in the past that her group would like to see a smaller Towson High School with a neighborhood feel, and they will explore redistricting to achieve that goal. They also want to prevent building out too close to adjacent Herring Run.

The 1949 portion of the school was built in the “art moderne” style, Allen said. A county landmarks pamphlet called it a “distinctive example of post-war-Modern pedagogical architecture, with massing and detailing characteristics of its period.”

It was built to deal with soaring school enrollment in the post-war era, the pamphlet said.

Additions were made in the mid-1960s, with major installations of heating and air conditioning systems in the 1990s, according to Baltimore County schools. The school system could alter the newer parts of the building like the interior, but would need approval from LPC to do anything to the historic stone building and its facade, Allen said.

Solving the puzzle

The building’s landmark status is being considered as the community works to solve a puzzle: How should the school system renovate the aging school while accommodating a rising population?

“That’s the million-dollar question,” said Towson resident John Holman, a “New in '22” member, whose four children went through Towson High School and grandchildren are slated to attend in the coming years.

Towson High advocates say the school is in dire need of repair. The building scored a 2.36 out of 5 on a 2014 facilities assessment, the third lowest high school in the county.

It is also too small. A February school system report projects that by 2022, Towson High, built to hold 1,260 students, will be more than 600 students over capacity.

Compounding the issue, the school sits on only 27.6 acres; by contrast, Dulaney High in Timonium sits on nearly 43 acres. That would make it difficult to build a second structure on the same land as other schools in the county, such as the nearby Carver Center for Technology, have done. Towson High is also landlocked by residential neighborhoods, making it more difficult to expand its acreage.

But in the mean time, advocacy groups are exploring options.

Evans Letocha said her group wants to see an open, transparent discussion of all the options on the table, including redistricting.

“Putting in a new 2,000-seat school while all those kids are still there is unrealistic,” Evans Letocha said. “There’s just not the space.”

Prumo said Wednesday that he supports considering redistricting as an option — “but if push comes to shove, I would choose delisting over redistricting.”

Delisting, Prumo said, could open the door to building a new and larger Towson High adjacent to the old building, making it possible to keep families from being redistricted.

“Everybody I’ve talked to, the basic thing they all agree on,” Holman said, “is it’s got to be shiny, new, safe and built for a new generation of students.”

Future steps

The meeting Prumo announced on Facebook was held “in response to members of the community asking for clarification regarding issues surrounding the landmark status of Towson High School,” county spokeswoman Kobler said.

“The administration does not have a position on the landmark status,” Kobler said.

County Councilman [David Marks](#) called Prumo’s Facebook announcement about the delisting conversation “premature.”

“My position is that we have planning money to look into this,” Marks said.

If it passes the County Council, that planning money will be included in the budget for Fiscal Year 2019, which starts in July.

In April, the school system will complete a draft site analysis with a “preliminary historical assessment with the [Maryland Historical Trust](#),” according to its website.

The county will then choose an architect in May, complete a feasibility study in October and start the design in November, the timeline said.

Margarita Cambest contributed to this story.

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